Exhume Kennedy, historian urges

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Unless the body of John F. Kennedy is exhumed and comprehensive tests made on every bullet fragment that figured in his death, the murder of the former president may never be solved, Dr. Michael L. Kurtz of the history department at Southeastern Louisiana University said here yesterday.

He refused to express conclusions about the case. "This is not the function of historians," he said. "However, I do believe the time has come for a scholarly study of the case by historians. I would say that the evidence now available does lean toward the conspiracy theory (that there was more than one person involved) and that tests, while not conclusive, do point to possible use of more than one gun."

Kurtz spoke during a discussion of the Kennedy assassination at the 43rd annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association at the Grand Hotel.

He discussed the medical and ballistics evidence in the case, saying that evidence is "a matter of reasonable doubt."

THE ORIGINAL AUTOPSY report on Kennedy's murder was altered, Kurtz said, citing as one source an unnamed official present at the autopsy. "The present report now considered official is undated and incomplete," Kurtz said. At first he used the word "forgery" about the report, but later qualified the term.

"The present report lacks any mention of several bodily organs," he said. "There are no tapes or films of the autopsy. We do not know what the original report said. Also, slides showing the president's brain, tissue and the chest are missing from the National Archives."

He said the missing items are "in the possession of the Kennedy family, who have access to them." The body may contain bullet fragments important to a solution, he said.

The present autopsy report says, for instance, that "the president fell forward onto the floor, which is obviously incorrect," Kurtz said. "It also uses the term 'presumed,' which is not proper medical terminology."

Another speaker, Howard Roffman of Florida, author of "Presumed Guilty," a book about the case, said the original autopsy report was burned by the chief autopsy officer "after it became clear that Oswald had been killed and the report would never be challenged in a courtroom."

KURTZ SAID HE believes that Bullet 399, said on the Warren Commission report to have been fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, "came from the gun that was supposed to have belonged to Oswald, but there is no evidence that it was fired at either President Kennedy or John Connally. It was found on a stretcher in the hospital in Dallas, and some theories today are that it may have been planted there, or even that the bullet now held by the FBI may not really be Bullet 399."

Neutron action analysis, a test designed to prove whether bullet fragments came from the same source, seems to show that more than one rifle was used, Kurtz said, but further study is needed.

However, he agreed with a questioner that it was possible the assassin might have used ammunition of different types in the same gun.

Asked whether he believes the confusion surrounding the case was caused by deceit or official bungling, Kurtz once more refused to state a conclusion. "However," he said, "I do think it may well have been the result of the Warren Commission's irresponsible and stupid actions. These people had no special expertise in this matter and some of them did not even attend the most significant meetings.

"It seems possible, however, that some members of the commission staff did presume Oswald to be guilty."

He cited the commission's finding that a bullet entered the president's neck, when other sources, including an inspection of the president's clothes, show that the wound was about six inches lower.

Dr. David R. Wrone of the University of Wisconsin said much of the material published on the assassination is filled with errors and "shoddy scholarship." He called former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's courtroom work in the trial of Clay Shaw "confused."